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Emil von Sauer
The color value in music

Herausgegeben von Jens Hagen Wegner

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The colour value in music

by Emil Sauer

My first musical instruction was derived from my mother, who was a disciple and an exponent of the Deppe school. She began musical training with me when I was but five years old, but finding this age too tender, after some time, allowed two additional years to pass, again taking the matter up in earnest with me at the age of seven. In 1879, when sixteen, I began studying with Nicolai Rubinstein, with whom I continued until his death in 1881, and for two years, viz., in 1884 and 1885, I was a pupil of Liszt.

In spite of statements otherwise, I was never a pupil of Anton Rubinstein, although I was in close personal relations with him, met him frequently, and knew him well. Two brothers could not offer greater contrasts. Anton was of congenial disposition and with much intensity of feeling would play a piece of music thirty times and each time show a variation according to his mood, while Nicolai was reflective and in playing a sonata or other composition showed not the slightest variation, no matter how frequently repeated the execution might be. Uniformity characterized his scores, and I never knew him to play a wrong note.

A fine distinction existed between the two, and brothers tho they were, a chicken and a pigeon were not more unlike than they. Nicolai was exceedingly wide in his musical acquaintance and range, and he anticipated and played everything in Moscow long before the music became known in Germany. The reputation of Nicolai Rubinstein was very great and in some respects he undoubtedly was the greatest musician of the century. It was counted an honor to have played with him, as most of the best artists did. Nicolai Rubinstein stands perhaps as the chief apostle of the school of pianism which signifies the absolute and mechanical rendering of a musical score exactly as the composer has written it down, but which does not now continue in favor and in whose doctrine I personally no longer believe. Pianism is thus made quite too narrow.

Anton, on the contrary, is to be called the great interpreter of music. He rendered the written score as it appealed to him. His was not of necessity the composer's conception, but the musical expression that came from and through Anton's keyboard was his interpretation of it. The Interpretation might vary with the rendering of another artist, just as in dramatic art the conception of one might differ from that of another actor. Thus arises the flexibility and variety in the rendering of an old favorite like Schubert's „Erlking", or a Chopin ballad, due to the diverse interpretation of various interpreters. Thought, imagination and feeling are great musical elements, and from my standpoint a man who has sixteen hours of daily practice and who is perfect as to technic, but who lacks soul, is not as good a musician as one whose practice is limited to one hour a day and whose technical finish is less perfect, but who is free from what may be called musical slavishness.

I may truly say that I have found an inspiration in art that has greatly aided my music, and that there is not an art gallery in all Europe that I have not seen and that I do not love. I believe that I have learned more from painting and the study of it that is of benefit to me than I derived even from Nicolai Rubinstein, great as is my debt to him.

Few artists are equally good as to color and form; and the chief present lack is color. A musician must likewise have experience before he can teach; and a pianist, to convey musical intelligence to an audience, must have a thousand unconsidered attributes. An untraveled player will not, for example, play as will one who has seen and known the world. Music is the grand profession that includes love, hate, pathos, grandeur, sublimity, with here and there a flash of color, a dash of humor and the small trifles that go to make up the harmonious whole. Music should not be objective but rather subjective.

There seems to me ever to be a harmony between art and music, and I worship at the shrine of Velasquez, who appeals to me as the greatest of painters, especially in the matter of color; and the two that come after him in the order of merit are Titian and Rembrandt. Velasquez teaches me much. When I look at one of his pictures, as I have done in Madrid, and see there ten thousand shades of black and gray, he shows me as nothing else can the possibilities of color significance and gradation, and it thus becomes possible for me to apply something of the same color grades to music, and In the interpretation of it to give to music a color value that it were impossible to obtain otherwise.

Music does not signify mere sound; the moment you go beyond the beautiful in its rendering it becomes pounding, and the charm is weakened if not altogether lost. It is not needful always to give to pianissimo and forte their full contrasting strength; but it is important that the musical picture which you create should be in as perfect harmony as one of Whistler's paintings, while something should always be left in music to the imagination. I have played In small Russian hamlets before the most ignorant peasants and have found there a musical appreciation that compares favorably with that of the most cultured American and European audiences, the difference being that the peasants would not be able to say why they liked the music, while in the other case some explanation might be given.

All audiences feel the magic influence of music, in Darkest Russia as well as in cultivated America. When I play I know my instrument as a jockey knows his

horse, and there must be something of a similar harmony between the piano and myself. It is a fact that I not only see the whole program before me as I play, but also the very musical expression that I intend to render.

The future American musical outlook appears to me full of hope and encouragement. The over-critical period fortunately has not yet been reached, and I hope it never will, but there is abundant appreciation for good music, well interpreted and executed. The only thing that I regret is the advertising methods that seem to be requisite here, as I came not for artistic controversy nor to claim superiority over any, but only to interpret so far as in me lies the music that I love and for which I live.